# Chaucer's Legendary Good Women

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011–4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia



First published 1998

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Adobe Garamond 11.5/14pt [CE]

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

ISBN 0 521 41655 8 hardback

# Contents

# Introduction

Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* purports to be a defence of women. A defence presupposes that a charge has been levelled, or that a slander requires an answer. In the fiction of this poem, it is Chaucer himself who is accused of perpetrating a slander on women's reputation, since he chose to write of the unfaithful Criseyde in an earlier work. He must therefore make amends for this sin against the God of Love by composing an exemplary collection of stories of women who 'were true in loving all their lives'. Thus the *Legend* is a palinode and sits squarely in an ancient literary tradition which commonly concerned itself with the relative merits and demerits of women and men.

The palinode or poetic recantation is above all a display of rhetorical skill in pleading a case, and from the time the palinode form made its first appearance in ancient Greek literature – when in a new poem Stesichorus recanted the 'sin' of slandering the archetypally feminine Helen of Troy with a new poem in her favour – the cause which was taken up was the defence of women or of love.[1] Two poems likely to have influenced Chaucer's *Legend* are considered palinodes: Book III of the *Ars Amatoria* by Ovid, and *Le Jugement dou Roy de Navarre* by Chaucer's near contemporary Guillaume de Machaut. In both of these the topic is the 'war of the sexes'; both use the exemplum technique, and indeed draw attention to its limitations as a method of valid proof; both make use of the stories of the traditional 'heroines' in versions

[1] See Eleanor J. Winsor, 'A Study in the Sources and Rhetoric of Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* and Ovid's *Heroides*', Dissertation, Yale, 1963, pp. 1–3; Elizabeth D. Harvey, 'Speaking of Tongues: the Poetics of the Feminine Voice in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*', in E. E. Dubruck, ed., *New Images of Medieval Women: Essays Toward a Cultural Anthropology* (Lewiston: Mellen, 1989), pp. 50–1.

marked by amusing distortions which reflect the biased point of view their teller wishes to affect. Many in Chaucer's audience would have been familiar with these poetic 'recantations' – indeed the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries mark a period when several other palinodes were composed.

The *Legend of Good Women* exhibits other traditional motifs of the palinode form: the hostility and threats of the God of Love or Venus, the poet's consciousness that he has been wrongly accused, the need for literary recompense in kind (indeed the poet is compelled to perform such recompense), and above all the comically maintained partisanship for the opposite side. One motif often seen in the medieval period is the statement that the poet has been forced to recant his sin because of the anger of the ladies of the court, as is suggested at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*. These stories can invariably be shown to be pure invention, a rhetorical ploy, for the poet's earlier work creates for the palinode its own adequate frame of reference.

Palinodal in form or not, all cases of medieval or renaissance defences of women must be seen as operating in a climate of debate. Sometimes there is a recantation of one's own poem as here. Sometimes the new work is a response to another author, as when Christine de Pizan was stimulated to write *The Book of the City of Ladies* after reading 'Matheolus', a famous compendium of antifeminist tenets. Sometimes, as in Boccaccio's *Concerning Famous Women*, the writer persistently counterpoints his retelling of tales about women against the accepted views of what it meant to be virile or womanly. And, in a world where 'men write the books', Chaucer is of course self-consciously espousing in the *Legend* the less common, less authoritative side of the debate.[2]

Moreover, in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* Chaucer makes frequent allusion to several other topics which were traditionally debated. Thus he juxtaposes such polarities as authority and experience, summer and winter, youth and age, mercy and judgement, and, of

[2] See A. Blamires with Karen Pratt and C. W. Marx, eds., *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: an Anthology of Medieval Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), a useful anthology of the antifeminist and feminist works with which the men of Chaucer's time were more than familiar.

course, flower and leaf – all subjects of debates which have their own literary expression elsewhere, and, as Thomas L. Reed recently pointed out, debates which are often in Middle English left humorously unresolved and unresolvable.[3] Reed proposes a context for these debates which is essentially recreational, ludic, even carnivalesque. For either side to win or lose unequivocally, or in accordance with the normal hierarchies, is unnecessary in such contexts, because each participant in the debate is presented as having an understandably justifiable point of view. Rather than concentrating on the merits of the relative debating positions, attention focuses on the dialectics of the argument and the competing interests of the disputants. It may well be that, for the original audience of the *Legend of Good Women*, such allusions to the ludic debate tradition, along with the fictionalised demand for a poetic retraction in praise of women, were signal enough that an orthodox courtly treatment of women was not to be expected.

The *Legend of Good Women* is not formally a debate in the sense that opposing arguments are put forward and argued. It is rather that the attitude the poet expresses towards women in the exemplary tales of which the *Legend* is composed contrasts uncomfortably with that expressed in their Prologue. In the Prologue we hear the idealising orthodox voice of traditional *louange des dames* or praise of women. In the Legends, purportedly composed as the penitential response to *Troilus and Criseyde*, Ovidian sympathy for women is mingled with Ovidian cynicism. With its three contrasting spokespersons – the God of Love, the harassed and reluctant male poet, and Alceste as representative woman – the *Legend* partakes of that kind of debate which does not seek to resolve but to exploit the biased interests and personalities of the participants.

In the Prologue the poet dreams of a queen, whom he thinks is his 'lady sovereyne' because of her beauty and evident goodness and who in her mercy takes it upon herself to intercede for him before the God of Love. Her clothing of green and white makes her look like the humble

[3] See T. L. Reed, *Middle English Debate Poetry and the Aesthetics of Irresolution* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), for discussion and bibliographic references to Middle English debates on these topics.

daisy of the fields, which the poet has been admiring in his waking life. The God of Love finally reveals to him that she is actually the legendary Queen Alceste of Thrace, in remembrance of whose goodness the daisy was created. In the course of the poet's dream he thus comes to understand that in some way the little flower and the queen-like lady dressed like a daisy are one in exemplary female virtue with the ancient heroine Alceste.

The attributes which the poet gives the daisy in the *Legend of Good Women* are symbolic of all a woman should be – humble, pure (as the daisy's petals are white), blushingly modest (as the petals have red tips), obedient (as the daisy opens and follows the sun), careful of her reputation (as the daisy closes at night), above all faithful (as the daisy blooms in winter as well as summer). The story of Alceste concerns a heroine who was so devoted to her husband that she chose to die in his place and was turned into a daisy because of her virtuous love. She is the embodiment of 'trouthe of womanhede', she 'knows al the bounds that she oghte to kepe', and she is thus an example to all other women in the practice of love and 'wyfhod'. In the action of the Prologue, this composite female personage shows mercy to the suffering poet and is described as the source of his poetic inspiration. This is straightforward encomium. All the descriptions of daisy, 'lady sovereyne', and good Alceste display no hint of irony, even if the traditional models of feminine worth, found for example in the poet's balade *Hyd Absolon*, are naively decorative rather than seriously examined. They certainly cannot be simply assumed ironic because the female virtues so lauded are not generally valued today.

In the Legends, on the other hand, Chaucer presents us with a collection of stories about women whose exemplary status as instances of legendary virtue was far from assured and whose suffering at the hands of men is often treated by Chaucer with flippancy, sometimes with sexual double entrendre, and finally with a show of boredom. Pretending to praise, pretending to sympathise, is a well-known technique of irony, especially when the topic is the praise or 'dispraise' of women. The stance which Chaucer adopts has similarities with other medieval defences of women, which operate by superficially opposing the view that women are naturally bad, while at the same time condemning their characteristic virtues as foolish. Chaucer may well

save women from the charge of native untrustworthiness, for example, only to lay them open to the charge of gullibility, of trusting men too much:

> O sely wemen, ful of innocence,
> Ful of pite, of trouthe and conscience,
> What maketh yow to men to truste so?
> 1254–6[4]

The epithets 'sely' (blessed, hapless) and 'innocent', which often collocate in the *Legend*, are entirely appropriate terms for describing women saints, but frequently bear the connotations 'simple, guileless, naive, gullible'.[5] It is clear that in this poem's strategy Chaucer is more than happy for such ambiguity to stand unresolved.

Chaucer has been commanded to compose a Legendary of good women, or a secular version of a collection of saints' lives. The God of Love has suggested that suitable subjects would be the heroines of the poet's own books, whom he featured in his balade, *Hyd Absolon*, and who are the ladies heading the crowd surrounding the Daisy Queen in his vision. While it is just possible to see a connection between the story of Alceste's sacrificial death and those of other women who 'died for love' or otherwise suffered, nevertheless many questions come to mind when some of these exemplary women turn out to be the like of Cleopatra and Medea. Why, if Chaucer genuinely wished to write about good women, choose to adapt the biographies of women generally thought to be bad? Cleopatra and Medea were serial killers, Medea and Philomela were infanticides, and close female associates of Hypsipyle and Hypermnestra were involved in mass murder. Such details are glossed over but not entirely suppressed in Chaucer's portraits – what unsavoury light, for example, would be thrown on the goodness of women (one thinks of the death of the men of Lesbos at the

[4] All Chaucer quotations are taken from L. D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn (Oxford University Press, 1987). Because of its date of publication, I have not been able to consider extensively the text in Janet Cowen and G. Kane's *Geoffrey Chaucer: the Legend of Good Women* (East Lansing: Colleagues Press, 1995). I have, however, consulted the occasional reading which I thought crucial, and removed from my own commentary on the Prologues any observation which depended on a small verbal deviation between the two versions, since Cowen and Kane (pp. 124–39) believe small variations in the G Prologue are more likely to be scribal than authorial.

[5] See *MED* for the meaning of 'sely' in *LGW* 2532 and 'innocent' in *LGW* 1546.

hands of its women), if we took Chaucer's advice in *Hypsipyle* and consulted the original for *all* the facts (1557–8)? Even when the heroines are as genuinely virtuous as Lucrece, may not their deaths be considered foolish and reprehensible suicides rather than the sacrifices of holy martyrs?

How, moreover, should we respond to the persistently fluctuating tone in the Legends? To take one example: Chaucer defuses the mood of pathos and horror which dominates his story of Tereus' rape and mutilation of his sister-in-law, Philomela, with an unexpectedly flippant concluding 'moral' for women, which trivialises the heroine's experience and that of all women at the hands of all men (2384–93). By contrast, his version of the Ariadne story is shaded with a measure of cynicism, but his treatment of Ariadne's eventual abandonment by Theseus on a deserted isle (2187–97) is not unsympathetic towards his heroine's anguish. Indeed, satire or even irony is far too blunt an instrument with which to dissect the peculiar effect of this and other of the Legends, for the occasional pathos seems intended genuinely to move its audience. Critics have too often tried to level out the differences in tone – to accept Cleopatra and her companions as in some sense the equal in virtue of the good Alceste, or else to respond to the evident comedy in some of the Legends by denigrating the goodness of other heroines such as Lucrece to make them fit the ironic model. Feminist critiques are only the latest in a long line of reductionist approaches to the *Legend of Good Women*, which take at face value its stated subject of defending women, while ignoring the effect on the poem's meaning of the frequently flippant stance the narrator adopts. There are, on the other hand, many critics whose assessment of the Legends is overwhelmingly affected by the many comic asides and cynical 'morals' which decorate the tales and who have finally concluded that the *Legend* is an 'unmerciful satire' on women.

How then are we to reconcile the opposing responses which the poem evokes? I believe that the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* offers us at least three contexts which should shape our interpretation of the uneasy clash obtaining in the *Legend* between the orthodox literary ideals of the gentleman-poet, *la louange des dames*, and the humorous allusions which are normally associated with other registers entirely, those in which women are comprehensively mocked. The first and

overarching context is that of the joke.[6] It is difficult to identify the nuances of social intercourse of a former time, but it is not impossible. Jokes at the expense of the opposite sex are a common pastime in any age, and are particularly easy to trace in the Middle Ages. The joke hinted at in the *Legend* is the one which said that while the existence of good women was conceivable, in practice none was likely to be found today. The position is adumbrated in the opening lines of the *Legend*, where Chaucer gives a carefully reasoned statement of the necessity and rationality of believing more things than can be validated by the evidence of one's eyes. As, in the nature of things, nobody can have any personal experience of the joys of heaven and the pains of hell, this is a case where it is necessary to accept the authority of scripture (F/G 17–28). It is a perfectly orthodox position, but the passage undoubtedly sets up a climate of scepticism which is intensified later in the Prologue when Chaucer tells us he is going to translate some old books, and we can believe them if we like, he doesn't care (G 88)! What then is the inherent improbability that the old authorities are asking us to believe? That it is the goodness in women that is the important but unverifiable tenet of faith in the 'religion' of the God of Love is suggested by the title and central situation of the poem.

Chaucer would not have been the first to suggest that the existence of good women was a phenomenon of which the ordinary man had no experience, nor could put to the test. Indeed, the brotherhood of men in the Middle Ages made many joking allusions to what everyone 'knew', that there are no good women, that all women talk too much, are inquisitive, extravagant, too interested in adornment, and cannot be trusted. They would have agreed with their modern descendants that there are no good women drivers or mothers-in-law. There had been, of course, some good women in the past, which we can read about, but there are few Lucreces or Penelopes, Alcestes or Griseldas today, as Jean de Meun made his Jealous Husband say.[7] The Good Woman is to be thought of as a legendary beast, a rare bird, a black swan: one can

[6] Cf. Janet M. Cowen, 'Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*: Structure and Tone', *SP* 82 (1985): 416–36.

[7] F. Lecoy, ed., *Le Roman de la Rose* (Paris: CFMA, 1965–70), 8621–76; H. W. Robbins, trans., *The Romance of the Rose by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun* (New York: Dutton, 1962), pp. 174–5.

theoretically conceive of such a fabulous creature, as one can *imagine* a black swan by mentally combining the idea of blackness with the idea of a swan, but one would not expect to find one on earth. Chaucer thus may dream of a fabulously virtuous woman and gracefully hint that he knows at least one good woman in reality, the one he praises as the daisy and confuses with the good Alceste. (This is possibly a compliment to Richard II's wife, Anne of Bohemia, to whom the poem is dedicated in the F Prologue.) But the notion of any large number of good and faithful women invites polite incredulity; indeed the narrator of the *Legend* pretends that his audience may be amazed at his claim of a vision of an enormous number of women, 'And trewe of love thise women were echon' (F 282–91/G 185–94). It is not so much the huge number of women in the vision, but the fact that they were all faithful in love that is so difficult to believe.

Two attitudes to women are thus united in the voice of the narrating male poet. As true believer and orthodox adherent of the 'religion of love' he praises and honours the goodness of women – the daisy, his 'lady sovereyne', the good Alceste. But, as ordinary man, he understands the involuntary doubts of those who must accept by faith those tenets of religion which cannot be tested by experience, a scepticism which he expects may be shown towards his own recounting of stories of the virtuous women which inhabit old books.

This stance is common to both versions of the Prologue. The ludic context, however, is not developed the same way in the two Prologues, each of which was possibly designed for a different audience or readership, and consequently employed differing rhetorical strategies.[8] In the F Prologue the narrating voice draws much of its character from the dialogue in which it engages with its implied audience. The F Prologue conveys a lively sense of a courtly audience at play which augments the bantering references in the Legends to 'ye wemen' and 'us men'. Its characteristic ambience is captured most evocatively in a long but obscure passage dealing with the courtship of the birds (F 125–70). Perhaps youthful and light-hearted flirtation would be a better term

[8] D. W. Rowe comes to a similar view of the relationship of the Prologues in *Through Nature to Eternity: Chaucer's Legend of Good Women* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), pp. 141–55. The F Prologue is usually thought to date from about 1386, the G Prologue from the early 1390s.

than courtship because, for all the conventional talk about choosing mates 'withouten repentyng' (F 146–7), the passage is not about serious troth-plighting, and certainly not about marriage. The transitory nature of the devotion promised by these servants of Love is pointed up with a gentle irony at several points, as when the avian suitors seek their mates' love by swearing 'on the blosmes to be trewe' (F 153–8). Hymning the courtly 'saint', St Valentine, Chaucer's birds hint that the alliances associated with his feast day were not only temporary but also extra-licit, love that accords with nature rather than human law (F 148–52). The matter and tone of many of the poems associated with St Valentine's Day suggest that a carnivalesque and 'up-so-doun' spirit was of its essence. Even Chaucer's contemporary Sir Oton de Grandson, considered the most gentlemanly and courtly of poets connected with the French and English courts, could indulge in antifeminist comments in his poetry for St Valentine – 'Who would ever trust a woman? . . . certainly no wise man, if he does not wish to spend his life in great suffering and sorrow!'[9]

The mode of courtly game established in this passage of the *Legend*, maintained by the narrator's comments on the Legends, seriously diminishes the tragic effect of their heroines' plights. The more vigorously Chaucer attacks the villains in his rogues' gallery, in the context of the *Legend of Good Women* the more likely they are to receive admiration (at least from the men in the audience, supposedly under attack along with them) for being competent exponents of the game of seduction. Chaucer suggests that there are Jasons enough among the men in his audience (1554–7). The unfortunate heroines of the Legends are only too full of mercy and pity for the feigned suffering of their would-be suitors (cf. F 160–5), but the ladies whom Chaucer addresses in his audience seem less 'innocent' and better armed against natural male duplicity. He does not believe they will so gravely misread the intentions of their lovers as Phillis did Demophon's (2401–2).

Thus part of the peculiar flavour of the *Legend of Good Women*, part of the larger context, that is, by means of which we interpret its component parts, is this sense of lively dialogue between men and

[9] *Complainte Amoureuse de Sainct Valentin* 67–77, see A. Piaget, ed., *Oton de Grandson: sa vie et ses poésies* (Lausanne: Société d'Histoire de la Suisse Romande, 1941), p. 483.

women, who of their nature espouse different points of view. There is evidence that just such literary duels between the sexes constituted a fair proportion of the entertainment of late medieval courts, alongside the activity of composing lyrics in praise of women, that which is often thought of as 'courtly poetry'. The kind of material that makes up the majority of the manuscripts in which the *Legend of Good Women* appears tells us something about such games, showing us courtly participants answering riddles, learning their fortunes at the 'chance of the dice' and debating questions about love. Glending Olson has proposed that medieval people did not perceive this kind of entertainment as totally frivolous. The mirth such pastimes occasioned was regarded as therapeutic and an antidote to the debilitation of melancholy.[10]

The G Prologue suppresses much of this sense of courtly audience and intimate game. Gone also is the dedication to the queen, extended praise of the daisy, and pervasive use of terminology associated with the religion of love. In its place is evoked a third context which enhances the other significant component of the *Legend of Good Women*, the poet's professional standing, his social role, his responsibility for choice of subject matter, his poetic integrity. Prologue G, generally thought to be a revision of Prologue F, is extant in only one manuscript. In leaving out some of the more obscure references to service of the Flower and cheeky allusions to the interests of a coterie audience, it presents a rather tidier structure and probably opens up the meaning of the poem to a wider readership. The G Prologue does no more than change the emphasis in the central scene of the *Legend of Good Women*, and it does not modify the basic intention conveyed by the F Prologue and the Legends (which are unaltered in both versions). Indeed, the intention is probably made clearer, and the G Prologue is almost invariably quoted in preference to F when the conceptual structure of the Prologue is at issue. There is a shift in register from the F Prologue's sense of light courtly entertainment towards one where the formal lines of the 'debate about women', as indulged in by men of learning, dominates the exposition of the G Prologue. The second mode, while still light-

[10] G. Olson, *Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), esp. pp. 164–204.

hearted and humorous, is more recognisably aligned with the claims of the serious male poet to debate and write effectively than are the slightly obscure allusions to courtly gameplaying of the former. It underlines the fact that the fictional debate about women is only an excuse to discuss the poetic craft, a topos which has enabled Chaucer to draw attention to his poetic output and the skill required not only to choose one's matter but to draw new meaning from it. It is generally agreed that Chaucer's original audience was particularly well equipped to appreciate the details of poetic technique and linguistic manipulation as well as the simple pleasure of story-telling,[11] and the shift between courtly game and broader intellectual context is an easy one. There is an interesting parallel in Christine de Pizan's decision to present the collection of documents which she had assembled on the Debate about the *Roman de la Rose* not only to the courtly audience surrounding Isabeau of Bavaria but also to a learned professional audience represented by Guillaume de Tignonville, Provost of Paris.[12]

Inasmuch as it is the poet's clerkly service of love which is at issue, the God of Love in the G Prologue is given a much longer speech in which to arraign the poet. His charge is more precisely one of defaming the goodness of women in general than it is in Prologue F. And this was, it must be said, the great topos by means of which the wit and ingenuity of the man of learning could be displayed:

> Hast thow nat mad in Englysh ek the bok
> How that Crisseyde Troylus forsok,
> In shewynge how that wemen han don mis?
> G 264–6

Chaucer's so-called bias against women and love in *Troilus and Criseyde* is characterised in the G Prologue as the traditional stance of the old and impotent man of learning (G 258–63). Moreover, the God of Love in the G Prologue invokes the whole corpus of clerical antifeminism

[11] Cf. P. M. Kean, *Chaucer and the Making of English Poetry*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge, 1972), I, p. 4; E. Reiss, 'Chaucer and his Audience', *ChauR* 14 (1980): 390–402, esp. p. 396; P. Strohm, 'Chaucer's Fifteenth Century Audience and the Narrowing of the "Chaucer Tradition"', *SAC* 4 (1982): 3–31, esp. pp. 26, 28.

[12] See J. L. Baird and J. R. Kane, eds. and trans., *La Querelle de la Rose: Letters and Documents* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures, 1978), p. 12.

when he calls as witnesses to the virtue of women the hallowed names of Walter Map and St Jerome (G 270–81). Jerome and Map do mention good women like Lucrece and Penelope, but only to liken them to legendary beasts no longer to be found on earth, as I have mentioned above.

When Chaucer gets a chance to answer the charge brought against him in the *Legend*, he takes issue with the simplistic notion of both Alceste and the God of Love (cf. G 270–2) that the meaning of a poem is to be equated with the poet's choice of subject matter. Not so, says Chaucer. The ultimate meaning depends on the poet's intention which he imposes upon his subject matter (F 471–4/G 461–4). Because a poem like *Troilus and Criseyde* is *about* unfaithfulness in love does not mean such unfaithfulness is being endorsed. Chaucer here appears to be claiming an eminently serious ethical intent for his previous work, a moral *utilitas*, the mark of a certain *auctoritas* which was normally only accorded the authorities of the illustrious past, who most certainly did not write in English, a language heretofore offered little respect.

The relevance can now be seen of the mysterious reference to Chaucer's translation of the *Roman de la Rose* which is yoked with the composition of *Troilus and Criseyde* in the God of Love's initial accusation against Chaucer (G 253–66). We do not know if Chaucer completed his *Romaunt of the Rose*; the significance of its citation, however, is in the poet's aligning of his *Troilus and Criseyde* with the French masterpiece as a work of infinite complexity, demanding subtle and sophisticated interpretation by its readers. Chaucer's association of *Troilus* with the *Rose* is a claim that its readers, too, must observe the rules of poetic decorum which demand that the parts be interpreted in light of the intention of the whole work, as well as a realisation that works that capitalise on irony and other means of indirection leave themselves open to misinterpretation. This is the burden of the arguments adduced in defence of the *Roman* in the famous *querelle de la Rose*,[13] of which we have the early fifteenth-century documents, and which affords an interesting comparison with the defence of the poet offered in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*.

[13] See E. Hicks, ed., *Le Débat sur le Roman de la Rose* (Paris: Champion, 1977); for English translation, see note 12.

Alceste's long speech in defence of Chaucer makes many of the same points as did the defenders of Jean de Meun in the *querelle de la Rose* – even to the instancing of the woman question, and in the point that he did not initiate the sin against the God of Love since he was a mere translator (G 340–5). The idea that translation was an act involving little intelligence or personal responsibility on behalf of the translator was transparently disingenuous. In fact, the transference of the cultural riches of the past from one language into another tongue and time was considered an endeavour of the highest worth. Other aspects of Alceste's defence of the poet show how little the issue at stake is a 'sin' against love and how much it is a declaration of the English poet's own sense of worth and social value. In partial mitigation of Chaucer's crime she enumerates the significant items of his poetic corpus (F 417–30/G 405–20), by means of which, she informs the God of Love, he 'hath maked lewed folk to delyte/ To serven yow, in preysynge of youre name' (G 403–4). Some of the works on the list have nothing to do with the service of love, for example, the translation of *Boethius*. In addition, some passages of the *Parliament of Fowls* or of *Palamon and Arcite*, which are tendered as part of the 'defence', slander the God of Love as grievously as anything in *Troilus and Criseyde*. This adds weight to the suspicion that Chaucer is simply setting up a straw man when he has the God of Love enunciate the charge against him, and Alceste defend him.

Moreover, Alceste's defence is embedded in an extremely long speech, of doubtful relevance, in which she admonishes the God of Love to beware of judging an accused man thoughtlessly and mercilessly, in short, of behaving like a tyrannical lord. While she hesitates at first to offer advice to a God, it is clear that she soon thinks of him as any other medieval ruler. The speech is a carefully constructed patchwork of quotations from cardinal works of the *de regimine principum* tradition, betraying an intimate familiarity with the kind of views expressed by Seneca, John of Salisbury, Giles of Rome, and in the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secretum Secretorum*. Literature of this kind was extensive in the Middle Ages, and as popular with ordinary men as with rulers. If it does nothing else, Alceste's speech enhances the poet's implicit claim to learning and high seriousness.

It is hard to see today how the components fuse in this curious

amalgam of courtly writing about love and relatively serious moral instruction on the duties of kings, but there is clearly a sense in which the service of the God of Love stands for the pursuit of the noble life. A gentleman aspired to be able to speak of love out of 'sentement' (F 69) but also to view the transient delights of the world from the perspective of Boethius (F 425/G 413). The man of learning, the scholarly poet, the 'servant of the servants of love', facilitated all these aspirations both with his graceful, courtly 'making' and with his other translations of more serious works. Both his stance as adviser to princes and his demonstrable ability to engage wittily in the debate about women functioned as markers of his usefulness to courtly society.

From at least the time of Ovid, Love and Woman were topics constituting the raw matter on which the male poet imposed form, his love poetry the ultimate witness to his creative power. Indeed, I have invented the phrase, the 'matter of Woman', by analogy with other great medieval 'matters' with which writers dealt, like the 'matter of Arthur' or the 'matter of Charlemagne', as a punning reference to the popular medieval discourse on the nature of Woman, a discourse gloriously stereotyped in joke and anecdote and pseudo-scientific understanding of Woman's close affinity with things material. The rhetorical exploitation of women as subject matter is particularly clearly exemplified in Chaucer's versions of the Lucretia and Dido stories.

We are becoming increasingly aware how thoroughly the discourse of writing, reading, interpreting, translating was permeated from ancient to modern times with metaphors derived from the commerce between women and men.[14] Both Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* and Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose* claimed to be, and were frequently enough accepted as, arts of poetry as much as arts of love or arts of seduction. In yet another important antecedent to the *Legend of Good Women*, the palinodal *Jugement dou Roy de Navarre*, Machaut humorously defended the honour of men in general and of himself as a poet when he defended his treatment of women in his earlier debate poem, *Le Jugement dou Roy de Behaingne*. In the *Legend of Good Women*, too, the male poet displays his mastery of the matter of Woman and of love poetry; in the tradition

[14] See Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

of the late medieval gentleman and poet the praise of women and the scepticism at women's virtue do not sit uncomfortably together; indeed, Chaucer's facility in handling both modes draws attention to his poetic skill.

The surface of the text of the *Legend of Good Women* is cheerfully biased in favour of the poet's own gender. Both in its stance of gentlemanly praise of women and in its occasional scepticism, it colludes with the expectations of a preponderantly male audience. That is, to be a poet and to be male are not rigorously distinguished in the *Legend*. It is a voice apologetic towards women, but not overwhelmingly so. It pities woman's plight, but sees no remedy for woman's situation beyond her return to quite traditional behavioural standards, to less wandering on the seashore, less trusting of strangers, less readiness to believe the promises of men. In endorsing Alceste's self-sacrifice Chaucer equates feminine goodness (see G 533–4) with confinement within 'the bounds that she ought to keep' and marginalises women in passivity (like Hypermnestra imprisoned) or silence (like Philomela with her tongue wrenched out by the man who raped her).[15] Where a heroine like Phillis is allowed expression, much of her complaint is truncated, except for the well-written parts! Moreover, it has been noted over the years that the strongest thematic link between the Legends is the comic abuse of men, and women as the victims of men. That is, Lucrece and Hypermnestra are not martyrs to their own service of love in the same sense that Dido and Medea are, but both are pawns in larger masculine enterprises. Though the male protagonists of the tales are ostensibly condemned, Chaucer usually devotes a fair portion of each narrative to the situation in which the 'hero' finds himself, in the world of action and affairs; the relevance to the account of the heroines' sufferings is not immediately obvious in, for example, the brilliant sea-battle in *Cleopatra* or the long description of Jason's adventures in *Hypsipyle and Medea*. Even the inner workings of the minds of the rapists, Tarquin in *Lucrece*, and Tereus in *Philomela* are vividly imagined and carefully rendered.[16] By the time Chaucer comes to the

[15] For a feminist reading of the silencing of the female voice in the *Legend*, see Harvey, 'Speaking of Tongues', pp. 52–7.

[16] Cf. R. W. Frank, Jr, *Chaucer and the 'Legend of Good Women'* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp. 43, 81; R. M. Lumiansky, 'Chaucer and the Idea